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The CIA Back In the Mud

The Central Intelligence Agency is back on page one, getting caught red-handed doing in Central America the same kind of dismal dirty tricks that gave it such a bad name a decade ago. So you have to wonder who didn't learn any lessons.

For the discovery and exposure by press and television, and the recoil by the Congress and public, were not only predictable; they were predicted at the highest levels of the administration by a figure the White House is now trying to cast as the villain of the piece.

Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig has been dragged into the case by a series of leaks from on high. The disclosures finger him, first, by dating the basic decision to support covert operations in Central America on Nov. 17, 1981—that is, while he was in office. The original idea, it is said, was to have the dirty tricks performed by Argentine security forces. That scheme supposedly fell through when Haig tilted toward Britain and away from Argentina during the Falkland crisis. Now, the argument concludes, the CIA is merely taking up the slack.

Despite that implicit smear, Haig is not talking for publication. But many of us knew his approach to Central America when he was in office. Previous impressions have been confirmed by officials still on the job. Haig does not deny the story.

Communist penetration of Central America was very much on his mind when he came to the State Department in January 1981. But he did not want to concentrate fire on the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, or the guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador. He regarded those as mere tentacles. He sought to go after the body of the octopus—Castro's Cuba.

Proposals for forcing confrontation with Castro were repeatedly advanced by Haig. His most ambitious project was to round up the misfits sent here by Cuba in 1980. Haig wanted to send them back to Cuba aboard an American ship under escort of the Atlantic fleet. Force, including reimposition of the blockade set up during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, would be used if there was any interference. Haig's theory was that Castro (and Moscow) would back down, and come off subversion in Central America.

That scheme and others like it were discussed at length in the Situation Room of the White House. President Reagan was there. So were his main White House attendants. Also present were Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, representatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and CIA Director William Casey.

Opposition to the Haig approach, rightly in my view, prevailed. The chiefs, backed by Weinberger, exposed military problems. White House officials worried about political fallout.

In lieu of the direct approach against Castro, the White House decided to mount against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua covert operations organized by the CIA around former military men from the deposed Somoza regime. But not before Haig had repeatedly pointed out that the scheme would not work. Not before, citing his own experience in Vietnam and in dealing with Castro in the 1960s, he had warned that the operations were bound to be disclosed and to provoke scandal and a public uproar.

So the Reagan administration made its decision in full knowledge that what has happened was going to happen. It cannot decently claim it was sandbagged by the media or sabotaged by the Congress. The opposition that has built up in this country is as normal an ingredient of the covert operations as the weather or the availability of transportation.

Not only did the administration know the risks, and elect to run them; it did so cynically. For the logic of the covert operations lies in the possibility of a deal. The United States would call off the dogs it has snapping at the regime in Nicaragua in return for the Sandinistas' calling off the dogs they have snapping at the regime in El Salvador. From the beginning, in other words, the Reagan administration has had in mind pulling the plug.

In those conditions, Congress is right to push very hard into the muck of the covert operations. This administration has shown that it is ready to ask the CIA for anything it can get away with. It is prepared to overlook the fact that the CIA works for this country with its well-known aversion to illicit interference in the affairs of other nations. So a smart rap on the knuckles is in order.

The more so as there is available a decent fallback position, in keeping with this country's basic traditions and its limited interest in Central America. The right approach has been blocked out by a group of notable private citizens from this country and Latin America, under former Ambassador Sol Linowitz. It is to work for a regional settlement with the countries that truly matter to the United States—Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia. They are the ones most threatened by communist penetration in Central America, and any settlement good enough for them is more than good enough for this country. Especially if, as a bonus, it preserves the good name of an intelligence apparatus that, appropriately employed, can serve a truly useful function.

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